

# St. Paul's Experience of God's Mercy and His Call to Holiness

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## Foundational Commands of the Hebrew-Christian Bible:

- Deut 6:4 – “Hear, O Israel! **The LORD is our God, the LORD alone!**”
  - “You shall not have other gods beside me.” (Exod 20:3; also Deut 5:7)
  - Penalty for *idolatry* (worshipping other gods) is being *stoned to death* (Lev 17:2-7)
- Lev 19:2b – “You shall **be holy**, for I the LORD your God am **holy**.” (also Lev 11:44-45; 20:26; 21:28)
  - “...for it is written, ‘You shall **be holy**, for I am **holy**.’ ” (1 Peter 1:16)
  - “**Be perfect**, therefore, as your heavenly Father is **perfect**.” (Matt 5:48)
  - “**Be merciful**, just as your Father is **merciful**.” (Luke 6:36)

## Biblical Vocabulary:

- Heb. *qadosh* / Gk. *hagios* – “holy, sacred, special, set apart” (closely related to “pure, blameless, unblemished”)
  - “holy/sacred” can apply to *times, places, objects, foods, buildings, people*, etc.
- Heb. *hesed* / Gk. *eleios* – “merciful; compassionate” (closely related to “loving kindness; steadfast love; forgiveness”)
  - opposites: “judgmental, harsh, vengeful, vindictive, punishing”
- Heb. *tamim* / Gk. *teleios* – “perfect; whole, entire, complete, mature, adult” (but *not* modern “perfectionism!”)
  - opposites: “partial, incomplete, immature, childish”

## Paul's Early Life: “Torah-Observant” and “Zealous” and “Blameless” – and a Persecutor of Christians!

- Phil 3:5-6 – “Circumcised on the eighth day, of the race of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrew parentage, *in observance of the law a Pharisee*, <sup>6</sup> *in zeal I persecuted the church, in righteousness based on the law I was blameless.*”
- Acts 22:3-4 – “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus in Cilicia, but brought up in this city [Jerusalem]. At the feet of Gamaliel I was *educated strictly in our ancestral law* and was *zealous for God*, just as all of you are today. <sup>4</sup> *I persecuted this Way to death, binding both men and women and delivering them to prison.*”

## Paul's “Conversion” on the Road to Damascus:

- Acts 9:3-30 – Luke's Initial Narrative Account
- Acts 22:6-21 – Paul's Speech to Jews in Jerusalem
- Acts 26:12-18 – Paul's Self-Defense before King Agrippa

## The “Revelation” of Jesus as God's Son (in Paul's Own Words):

- Gal 1:11-17 – “For I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that **the gospel** that was proclaimed by me *is not of human origin*; <sup>12</sup> *for I did not receive it from a human source, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.* <sup>13</sup> You have heard, no doubt, of my earlier life in Judaism. I was violently *persecuting* the church of God and was trying to destroy it. <sup>14</sup> I advanced in Judaism beyond many among my people of the same age, for I was *far more zealous* for the traditions of my ancestors. <sup>15</sup> But **when God**, who had set me apart before I was born and *called me through his grace, was pleased* <sup>16</sup> **to reveal his Son to me**, so that I might proclaim him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with any human being, <sup>17</sup> nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were already apostles before me...”
- 1 Cor 15:8-10 – “Last of all, as to one untimely born, **he [Jesus] appeared also to me**. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I *persecuted* the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them....”
- Eph 3:1-3 – “This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles— <sup>2</sup> for surely you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, <sup>3</sup> and how **the mystery was made known to me by revelation**, as I wrote above in a few words.”

## Paul's Experience of God's Grace as “Mercy”:

- 2 Cor 4:1 – “Therefore, since it is **by God's mercy** that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.”
- 1 Tim 1:13-16 – “I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and an *arrogant* man, but **I have been mercifully treated** because I acted out of ignorance in my unbelief. <sup>14</sup> Indeed, the grace of our Lord has been abundant, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>15</sup> This saying is trustworthy and deserves full acceptance: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. Of these I am the foremost.* <sup>16</sup> But for that reason **I was mercifully treated**, so that in me, as the foremost, Christ Jesus might display all his patience as an example for those who would come to believe in him for everlasting life.”

### Mercy Is Primarily an Attribute of God:

- Rom 9:15-16 – “For he says to Moses, ‘I will **have mercy** on whom I **have mercy**, and I will **have compassion** on whom I **have compassion**.’”<sup>16</sup> So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who **shows mercy**...”
- Rom 11:30-32 – “Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now **received mercy** because of their disobedience,<sup>31</sup> so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the **mercy** shown to you, they too may now **receive mercy**.”<sup>32</sup> For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may **be merciful** to all.”
- 2 Cor 1:3 – “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the **Father of mercies** and the God of all consolation,”
- Phil 2:27 – “He was indeed so ill that he nearly died. But **God had mercy** on him, and not only on him but on me also, so that I would not have one sorrow after another.”
- Eph 2:4-7 – “But **God**, who is **rich in mercy**, out of the great **love** with which he loved us<sup>5</sup> even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—**by grace you have been saved**—<sup>6</sup> and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus,<sup>7</sup> so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his **grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus**.”

### Christians Are Called to Be Merciful:

- Eph 4:32 – “and **be kind** to one another, **tenderhearted, forgiving** one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.”
- Phil 1:8 – “For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the **compassion** of Christ Jesus.”
- Phil 2:1-2 – “If then there is any **encouragement** in Christ, any **consolation** from love, any **sharing** in the Spirit, any **compassion** and **sympathy**, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.”
- Col 3:12-14 – “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, **heartfelt compassion**, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience,<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do.<sup>14</sup> And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection.”

### Christians Are Called to Be Holy:

- Rom 1:7a – “to all the **beloved of God** in Rome, **called to be holy**.”
- 1 Cor 1:2 – “to the church of God that is in Corinth, to **you who have been sanctified** in Christ Jesus, **called to be holy**, with all those everywhere who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.”
- 2 Cor 7:1 – “Since we have these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of flesh and spirit, **making holiness perfect** in the fear of God.”
- Eph 1:4 – “as he [God] **chose us** in him [Christ], before the foundation of the world, **to be holy and without blemish** before him...” (cf. 5:27)
- 1 Thess 3:13 – “so as to strengthen your hearts, to **be blameless in holiness** before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his holy ones. Amen.”
- 1 Thess 5:23 – “May the God of peace himself make you **perfectly holy** and may you entirely, spirit, soul, and body, be preserved **blameless** for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- 2 Tim 1:9 – “He **saved us** and **called us to a holy life**, not according to our works but according to his own design and the grace bestowed on us in Christ Jesus before time began,”

### Paul Often Refers to Believers as “Holy Ones” or “Saints”:

- 2 Cor 1:1-2 – “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God that is in Corinth, with **all the holy ones** throughout Achaia: **grace** to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”
- Eph 1:1 – “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to **the holy ones** who are [in Ephesus] faithful in Christ Jesus:”
- Phil 1:1 – “Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all **the holy ones** in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi...”
- Paul says “**holy ones**” about 25 times throughout his letters; he also uses “brothers and sisters” about 100 times.

### Other Formulaic Greetings in Pauline Letters:

- 1 Thess 1:1 – “Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: **grace** to you and **peace**.” (cf. 2 Thess 1:1-2; Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; Tit 1:4; Phlm 3)
- Gal 6:16 – “**Peace** and **mercy** be to all who follow this rule and to the Israel of God.”
- 1 Tim 1:2 – “to Timothy, my true child in faith: **grace, mercy, and peace** from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- 2 Tim 1:2 – “to Timothy, my dear child: **grace, mercy, and peace** from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- See also 2 Jn 3 – “Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father’s Son in **truth and love**.” and Jude 2 – “may mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.”